

Mobile students' appraisals of keys to a successful stay abroad experience: Hints from the IEREST project

Abstract

In order to provide better support for students in higher education throughout a mobility experience, it is important to understand their point of view regarding stay abroad. Such inquiry can be carried out by eliciting students' fears and hopes (Coleman, 2003), perceived achievements (Meier & Daniels, 2013), expectations (Pitts, 2009), or, as in the present study, their perspectives on what makes a stay abroad experience successful.

This paper analyzes the responses of pre-departure, while-abroad, and upon-return students of different academic backgrounds (N = 990) to an open question that asked them to name the three most essential factors for making their stay abroad experience successful. This question was part of a wider online questionnaire distributed in Europe by the IEREST project (<http://ierest-project.eu>) in spring 2013 (Beaven et al., 2013; IEREST, 2015).

A sequential mixed method procedure (qualitative first, then quantitative) (Creswell, 2003) identified six themes that were frequently cited by the student respondents: language and communication, social contacts, practicalities, personal development, academic advantages, and travel. This paper presents a more detailed analysis of the first three themes, highlighting the most salient aspect in each theme, respectively, language proficiency, making friends, and openness. It shows that although language proficiency was the single most frequently mentioned aspect, students attached particular importance to aspects of personal development (in particular with respect to openness) and social contacts (crucially including friendship). These findings informed the development of teaching materials within IEREST for supporting intercultural learning in the Erasmus context and may also be relevant to educators and researchers in various other study abroad contexts.

Keywords

IEREST; language proficiency; personal development; social contacts; study abroad; student perceptions

1. Introduction

Study abroad in higher education has attracted wide attention in recent years. This is not surprising, considering the increase of the number of mobile students worldwide. From 2000 to 2012, an average annual growth rate of almost 7% was registered in respect of the number of foreign students enrolled worldwide (OECD, 2014). Teichler (2011) points out that these figures may still be imprecise, for one because they have been calculated on the basis of citizenship, thereby making it impossible to distinguish "genuine mobility" (i.e. border-crossing) from "inward mobility" (i.e. that of people who may have lived for years in the countries where they are enrolled without having that country's citizenship). Nevertheless, student mobility in both degree-seeking and exchange students is a significant phenomenon, which most probably will face further expansion in upcoming years (Coleman, 2015). It thus seems particularly worthwhile to investigate the effects mobility has on students and on societies at large. Indeed, a considerable body of research has focused on the impact that mobility has in terms of students' language learning (Kinger, 2011), academic adjustment (Bogain, 2012), personal development (Brown, 2009), and employability (Paige et al., 2009).

The study presented in this paper aimed at exploring this issue by focusing on what students of different academic backgrounds (not only language majors) look for in mobility, and

how they value the multifaceted opportunities that the experience abroad can offer them. In particular, the intent was to examine the foremost criteria that mobile students consider essential for making their stay abroad successful, as spontaneously mentioned by students themselves. The present study was part of a broader investigation conducted in Europe within the IEREST project (<http://ierest-project.eu>) on students' opinions and attitudes towards study abroad and its potential for intercultural learning. Such overall review was a necessary pre-condition for the project to reach its objectives, namely to develop a set of teaching activities of intercultural education for Erasmus students which were meaningful and useful for the students themselves.

2. Literature review

Study abroad has been researched in several fields and for various reasons, with one result being that such studies have often focused only on certain preselected dimensions of the students' experiences abroad (e.g. language learning, personal achievement and satisfaction, academic success). However, these dimensions of living abroad are tightly bound together even though they presumably interrelate in different ways for different students. Study abroad is a complex, fluid, multi-dimensional phenomenon, in which contextual and individual variations play a prominent role in shaping individual experiences (Coleman, 2013).

2.1 Multi-dimensionality of study abroad

The *Residence Abroad Project* (Coleman, 2003) is a convincing example of a study that has deliberately adopted a *multi-dimensional approach* in investigating mobile students' own expectations and perspectives. 2,325 language students spending a period abroad as part of language degree courses were surveyed through a questionnaire consisting of closed and open questions. At the moment of administering the survey, they were at different stages of the mobility cycle (pre-departure, while-abroad, and upon return). Respondents were predominantly asked to consider their experience holistically, in terms of the general hopes and fears they had rather than focus on specific domains (language, social contacts, home universities, etc.). Considering that respondents were language students, it is not surprising that language learning was named as their most important objective by far. However, the study also highlighted that great importance was attributed to independence and confidence, as well as to new cultural experiences.

More recently, another smaller multi-dimensional investigation has confirmed such findings. As part of a broader study, Meier (2010) and Meier and Daniels (2013) asked 24 language students to describe their main achievements while abroad within semi-structured interviews. Personal development was mentioned as almost being on a par with language learning, and students also attached significance to achievements with regard to future employability and enjoyment. Interestingly, when specifically asked about personal development abroad, students expressed their gains in terms of "confidence", "independence", "learning more about oneself", "growing up", and "personal strength" (Meier, 2010).

An extensive multi-dimensional survey, conducted by McMillan and Opem (2004) among study abroad alumni ($N > 3,400$) of various majors, yielded comparable findings. Personal growth was one of the most frequently mentioned aspects, particularly with reference to self-confidence and the fact that the experience made them learn something new about themselves. An additional interesting result in McMillan and Opem's survey is that more than half of the respondents (52%) mentioned that they were still friends with people they met while abroad, no matter how much time had passed since their sojourn.

Overall, multi-dimensional studies can help identify what gains students value most at the different stages of their mobility experience. However, it should be noted that the focus of the aforementioned studies differed significantly. Coleman (2003) asked students for their general hopes and worries before departure, while results from Meier (2010), Meier and Daniels (2013), and McMillan and Opem (2004) refer to respondents' perceived achievements and the perceived effects of study abroad. As far as such effects are concerned, a future distinction to be considered is that between the short-term (Meier, 2010) and long-term impact of mobility experiences (McMillan & Opem, 2004). Other studies, still multi-dimensional in principle, focus on the aspect of students' expectations more than on their hopes and worries (Pitts, 2009). Such differences in research constructs discourage direct comparisons of results; however, if interpreted with caution, these studies present a global picture of how students look upon their mobility experiences.

While multi-dimensional research on study abroad appears relatively limited in quantity, there have been numerous investigations aimed at exploring specific aspects of students' experiences abroad. While a full review of the latter is beyond the scope of this article, it is still useful to introduce the three research themes that were most relevant to our own multi-dimensional study, namely language learning, social contacts, and personal development.

2.2 Language learning

Research on gains in a second language as a result of study abroad is particularly well covered. In general terms, the context of study abroad seems more beneficial than other learning contexts as far as language learning is concerned; this is thanks to its positive effects on fluency, writing skills, vocabulary, pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence, and aspects of grammatical accuracy (Kington, 2011; Llanes, 2011).

Study abroad research has also focused on the correlation of a series of individual variables (such as attitudes, motivations, gender, age, pre-departure language level, etc.) with language gains abroad (Llanes et al., 2012). Similarly, individual variables have been demonstrated to be more or less decisive for language development, depending on the role played by social variables such as L2 contact and social networks (Magnan & Back, 2007). Such social variables have been given increasing attention, and current research has witnessed a general shift from considering students as language learners to seeing them as language users and social actors (Coleman, 2013). If mobile students enhance their language proficiency by actively using it, this creates the need to identify and understand better those with whom they spend time abroad (Coleman, 2015).

2.3 Social contacts

Still from a mainly language-oriented perspective, considerable research has been conducted on students' social contacts during stays abroad (Freed et al., 2004; Jackson, 2008). The underlying assumption is that the more contacts students have with local communities (i.e. 'native speakers'), the more advances they make in language. Coleman's concentric circles of social networks (2013) can help conceptualize the nature of the relationships mobile students build abroad, representing engagement with co-nationals (inner circle), with other outsiders, e.g. the Erasmus community (central circle), and with locals (outer circle). It has recently been shown that having friends within the outer circle of local communities is a main objective for students when living abroad (McManus et al., 2014), even though it also presents a challenge and a wide source of disappointment (Meier & Daniels, 2013; Mitchell, 2015).

2.4 Personal development

Often, students affirm that personal change (expressed in terms of openness, self-confidence, independence, etc.) is one of the main reasons why they decided to go abroad (Alfranseder, 2011) as well as an important expected (Coleman, 2003) or achieved learning outcome (McMillan & Opem, 2004; Meier, 2010; Meier & Daniels, 2013). Participants in Jackson's ethnographic study, for example, name as "perceived outcomes ... enhanced personal growth, self-confidence, and maturity; a higher degree of independence; a broader worldview; more awareness and acceptance of cultural differences; enhanced intercultural communication/social skills; and a greater appreciation of their own culture and identity" (2008, p. 214). Such impressions seem to be mirrored in some studies that have identified in returnees higher degrees of "emotional stability", "self-efficacy", "capacity of problem-solving", "independence" (Tracy-Ventura et al., in press), and "self-understanding" (Brown, 2009). However, other studies have not confirmed such positive results (Papatsiba, 2005). Overall, further investigation of these issues is advocated.

Still in respect of personal development, research has also been conducted with the aim of understanding the influence of study abroad on students' intercultural learning (used here as an umbrella term also for 'intercultural sensitivity', 'intercultural competence development', 'cross-cultural adjustment'). While some studies report positive results (Anderson et al., 2006), others argue that exposure to a new environment is not sufficient for intercultural learning (Alred et al., 2003). In this regard, research on social contacts has highlighted how relationships - and especially friendship - can be taken as an indicator of successful intercultural learning (Hammer and Hansel, 2006; Shaules, 2007).

3. The study

3.1 The context: the IEREST project

The study in this paper is situated within the wider context of the IEREST project (*Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers*), a three year project (2012-2015) co-funded by the European Commission within the Lifelong Learning Programme. The project developed, tested and disseminated a set of ten teaching activities of intercultural education to be provided to Erasmus students before, during and after the study abroad. The activities are published under the *Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0* licence, and thus freely downloadable from the IEREST website (<http://ierest-project.eu>).

An innovative aspect of the IEREST teaching activities for mobile students is that they pursue a non-essentialist approach to culture and diversity (Holliday, Hyde, Kullman, 2010). Students are not invited to develop a specific skill set and body of knowledge potentially useful in their country of destination; to the contrary, they explore their own and others' multiple senses of belonging beyond that of national or ethnic identity (IEREST, 2015).

According to this approach and in order to define relevant learning goals for the activities, an investigation into the IEREST target groups (students, teachers, and higher education institutions) was conducted during the initial phases of the project (Beaven, Borghetti, Van Maele & Vassilicos, 2013). In addition to a review of the literature and a series of focus groups with a number of representatives of the three target groups, this investigation comprised the design, distribution, and analysis of the student questionnaire from which the present study has been drawn. The complete form of the questionnaire is available in the "Actions & report" page on the IEREST website (<http://www.ierest-project.eu/node/12.html>).

3.2 Data collection

The questionnaire was distributed online (*SurveyMonkey*) in April 2013 through the IEREST partnership and their wider network of higher education institutions and associations in Europe. The following groups were addressed: students who had indicated they would be leaving for a stay abroad in the current or following academic year; students who were currently on a stay abroad; and students who had recently returned from a stay abroad. Four language versions of the questionnaire (English, French, Italian, Slovenian) were prepared and sent out to a total of 12,403 students, leaving respondents the choice of which language version to fill out. With 3,557 respondents, the global response ratio was 29%, with 2,010 respondents completing all six sections of the questionnaire.

The results presented in this paper have been based on the 990 students who submitted a response to the English language version of a single question, namely: *Name three things that according to you are essential for making your stay abroad experience successful*. The respondents were asked to complete this open question without any further hints. Furthermore, the preceding questions did not contain any cues that could have prompted the students to respond in one sense or other.

By focusing solely on the English questionnaire, the foremost lingua franca in a higher education context, we defined a data set that was deemed to be characteristic of the wide variety in origins that is found in transnational student mobility. All in all, respondents to the English questionnaire entered 52 different home institution countries from around the world, including 30 European countries. The other language versions of the questionnaire displayed a much more limited geographical span and were not included in the data analysis.

Further, the respondents to the English questionnaire were between the ages of 19 and 27, with two thirds (67%) of the population between 20 and 23 years old. Approximately two thirds of the respondents were female students (67%); six out of ten respondents were bachelor students (59%); the others were master's (39%) and PhD students (2%). All the respondents were exchange students, which is to say they were involved in different forms of "genuine mobility" in Teichler's terms (2011), with almost three out of four participating or planning to take in the Erasmus program (74%). For the great majority of respondents (78%), the purpose of their stay abroad was solely for study, with other segments looking for work experience (8%) or a combination of both (14%). Most students reported having had no prior study abroad experience (77%), and most had also never before lived in another country (76%). Lastly, the questionnaire was distributed among the mobile student population as a whole, yielding responses from students from social sciences and humanities (70%) as well as sciences, engineering, technology, and biomedical sciences (30%).

It is important to point out that we opted to study the answers as coming from the mobile student community as a whole. We wanted to lend an ear to the assembly of students and listen to their appraisals of keys to a successful stay abroad: what calls ring loudest and what is just heard as a soft murmur in the background? The aim was not to compare answers according to students' national, language or academic background. As a matter of fact, in accordance with the overall theoretical orientations of the project (IEREST, 2015), we refrained from asking any questions that could promote an essentialist analysis by which individual behavior could be reduced to the assumed 'essence' of the national, linguistic, or any other group the student belongs to (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2010). However, this approach also brought with it some intrinsic limitations of the present study, most notably that it was not designed to enable a quantitative analysis from which conclusions can be drawn about the impact of specific variables like home country, dominant language, study major, stage of the study experience, etcetera.

3.3 Data analysis

As stipulated in the question, almost all respondents named three things they considered essential for making their stay abroad experience successful, resulting in a data set of 2,953 responses. (A perfect response rate would have yielded $990 \times 3 = 2,970$ responses). A sequential mixed method procedure was adopted for analysis (Creswell, 2003). At a first stage this procedure consisted in several cycles of thematic analysis of students' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes and themes identified during the thematic analysis were then, in a second stage, compared quantitatively.

Concerning the first stage of the study, data were first analyzed through an inductive process of three cycles of thematic analysis. In a first round of analysis the responses were coded manually by one of the authors, resulting in a preliminary semantic categorization of the students' responses. In a second round an additional annotator reviewed all the responses that had initially been left uncoded. At this point a set of 20 codes had been identified, comprising 2,299 of the 2,953 responses (78%). Finally, a third annotator independently re-coded all the coded responses according to the code set, with a satisfactory inter-annotator agreement (93%) as a result.

Appendix 1 lists the 20 codes in alphabetical order together with a sample of the student responses that are covered by each code. The table also illustrates what responses were considered to fall outside particular codes. For instance, when responses make only ancillary reference to friends or friendship ('support from friends'), or when they merely refer to a 'friendly' demeanor or atmosphere ('friendly people'), they were not counted as instances of 'making friends'. Responses were also left uncoded when the phrasing was too general, vague, or ambiguous (e.g. 'school'; 'organization'; 'learn something'; 'partnership'), or when they were too idiosyncratic to be assigned to a particular category or to constitute a category of their own (e.g. 'luck'; 'free time'; 'study in another country'; 'clean showers').

Once coding had been completed, the search for themes among the codes was informed by the common themes used in the literature on student mobility (including language learning, personal development, academic gains, ...) so as to facilitate the interpretation process. Following the thematic analysis, in the second stage we tallied the instances of each code and theme, and calculated their frequency of occurrence, as reported below.

4. Results and discussion

As an intermediate result of the data analysis, we arrived at a code set that represents the criteria for a successful study abroad as perceived from a student perspective. As the table in the appendix shows, there are four criteria that students cited more frequently than others as keys to a successful study abroad: 'language proficiency' (11%), 'getting to know people' (11%), 'making friends' (11%), and 'openness' (10%). This means that each of the above criteria was named by approximately one out of three respondents in their shortlist of three keys for a successful study abroad. Other criteria were, by contrast, hardly mentioned by the students: 'respect', 'contact with home', and 'culture-specific knowledge' all feature in less than 1% of the coded responses.

By clustering the codes that emerged from the student responses as semantic themes, the following six themes were subsequently identified: Personal Development, Social Contacts, Practicalities, Language & Communication, Academic Success, and Travel. Together, these six themes cover 18 of the 20 criteria, representing 96% of the coded responses. The two remaining criteria – Preparation and Culture-Specific Knowledge – could not unambiguously be assigned to one of the identified themes nor did they occur so frequently as to constitute a theme of their

own. Table 1 lists the six themes with the criteria they each comprise. It also provides the relative and absolute frequencies with which each theme occurs in the coded responses.

Themes	Frequency ¹	Codes
Personal development	26% (596)	<i>Openness</i> <i>Confidence</i> <i>Curiosity and discovery</i> <i>Commitment</i> <i>Respect</i>
Social contacts	25% (585)	<i>Getting to know people</i> <i>Making friends</i> <i>Integration</i> <i>Extracurricular offer of social activities</i> <i>Contact with home</i>
Practicalities	19% (446)	<i>Money and material goods</i> <i>University support</i> <i>Housing</i>
Language and communication	12% (279)	<i>Language proficiency</i> <i>(Successful) communication</i>
Academic advantages	10% (221)	<i>Interesting courses</i> <i>Academic success</i>
Travel	4% (100)	<i>Travel</i>
Other	4% (66)	<i>Preparation</i> <i>Culture-specific knowledge</i>

Table 1 Overview of the identified themes and their frequency

In the following sections, three prevailing themes will be discussed in more detail with reference to the most frequently mentioned criteria that they relate to. These themes have been selected, first of all, on the basis of the frequency with which they occur in the data set. Table 1 shows that Personal Development is the most frequently cited theme by students, closely followed by Social Contacts. Between them, these two themes represent more than half of all responses in the study. In addition, we considered the relevance of the themes to the objectives of the intercultural learning track in the IEREST project. The themes Practicalities and Academic Advantages were both beyond the scope of what the project set out to achieve whereas Language and Communication was clearly relevant to its objectives. Consequently, the ensuing sections present details covering the following three themes: Language and Communication, which will be discussed with reference to the criterion 'language proficiency'; Social Contacts, with reference to the criterion 'making friends', and Personal Development in view of the criterion 'openness'.

4.1 Language and Communication: language proficiency

The Language and Communication theme includes the overall most frequently mentioned success criterion by the respondents, namely 'language proficiency'. This criterion comprises 11%, or 263 of the overall 2,299 coded responses. As such, it outweighs 'successful communication', the only other criterion in this thematic cluster, by 16 to 1 in the coded data set. While a common response coded within this category is simply the term 'language,' the majority of the responses within this code fall within one of the following four areas:

¹ Frequency of occurrence expressed as a percentage of the coded responses, followed by the number of instances in the coded sample.

- 'Learning' and semantically similar phrases ('learn the language,' 'language courses,' 'practice' or 'improving the language') with 78 mentions or 30% of the responses within this code;
- 'Knowledge' and variants ('knowledge of the language,' 'basics of the language,' 'knowing the language') with 76 mentions or 29% of responses within this code;
- 'Skills' and variants ('language skills,' 'language proficiency,' 'Good command of X language,' 'good level of English') with 36 mentions or 14% of responses within this code;
- 'Speaking' with 19 mentions or 7% of responses within this category.

These results confirm well-known findings from previous multi-dimensional studies on the importance attributed by mobile students to language learning (Coleman, 2003; Meier, 2010; Meier and Daniels, 2013). However, within this study respondents were not restricted to language degree students, who for their part would be expected to demonstrate a high degree of attention to language, for instance out of a concern for academic achievement. Instead, the degree of incidence of language within the survey results may perhaps be linked, among other things, to a continuing impact of European and global discourses on the importance of languages and to the genuinely felt need for adequate language skills, be it in the local language or the lingua franca, once students find themselves at their host university. At the same time, in understanding this high incidence, one cannot overlook the fact that language preparation is often the most readily available dimension of student mobility preparation that (home and host) universities take upon themselves. Consequently, students may be primed to think of language proficiency when they are asked to name keys to a successful stay abroad experience.

4.2 Social Contacts: friendship

Our study underscores the importance attributed by students to Social Contacts, as this theme comprises one out of four (25%) of the total number of responses. Like 'language proficiency', 'making friends' and 'getting to know people' each comprise 11%, or respectively 248 and 251 of the 2,299 coded responses. Within the category 'making friends', all the grouped responses include some mention of the terms 'friend' or 'friendship' (*Appendix 1*). The most common responses included are verbal phrases such as 'friends,' 'mak(ing) friends,' 'having friends,' 'find(ing) friends,' as well as the combination of 'friends' and 'friendship' with specific descriptors (e.g. 'circle of friends,' 'strong friendship bonds'). Longer responses within this code tend to specify either the nature and number of such friendships (e.g. 'new,' 'local,' 'lots,' 'with people from all over the world') or the benefits associated with such friendships (e.g. 'friends you can hang with,' 'to not feel alone,' 'makes you feel better,' or 'to get some international experience'). Apart from the one-word responses of 'friends' or 'friendship,' 'making friends' constituted the most common response within this category with 69 out of 248 coded responses being solely comprised of or including this verbal phrase.

The choice of phrasing, which emphasizes the active role of the mobile student in establishing friendship, also characterizes the other dominant code in this theme, 'getting to know people', which comprises references to getting together with people, meeting (new/lots of) people, networking, and socializing (*Appendix 1*). Such phrasing may be seen to emphasize an active and ongoing process through which students form relationships and friendships during study abroad, as for instance may occur in international buddy programs and similar initiatives. Further research could reveal who those social contacts are, for instance, whether they are predominantly co-nationals from the "inner circle"; other international students from the "central circle"; or local students and non-students from the "outer circle" (Coleman, 2013).

4.3 Personal Development: Openness

As is the case for the Social Contacts theme, one out of four (26%) of the coded data relates to Personal Development. Although students also frequently refer to 'confidence' (and 'independence'), 'curiosity and discovery' and 'commitment', 'openness' is the dominant criterion mentioned by respondents in this cluster, collecting 10% or 229 of the overall 2,299 coded responses. This category includes all references to openness and open-mindedness, as well as student responses that refer to understanding of differences and cultures, tolerance, withholding of judgment, broadening of one's horizon or perspective, and gaining or gathering intercultural experience (*Appendix 1*). These references also illustrate the broad approach we took in coding by not defining openness solely as a desired outcome of transformational learning but also, following Barner and Barner (2011), as a prerequisite to transformational learning. In this sense its meaning may include openness to new experience as well as ways of overcoming barriers to openness such as "assuming non-judgemental attitude," "attending to the embedded experience," and "staying engaged with challenging life events."

'Being open' and 'open-minded' are the most frequent responses included within this category, outnumbering other responses coded within this category at a frequency of roughly three to one (177 explicit mentions of 'open' or 'open-mind'). Longer responses tend to specify that about which one should be open or have an open mind ('to new experiences and challenges,' 'for cultural differences,' 'to everything offered to you'). To further consider the contents of the student responses, it should be noted that openness and open-mindedness may have a wide range of meanings. After all, openness as a personal trait or disposition may refer, among other things, to emotional competence in response to divergent cultural practices (Koehn & Rosenau, 2002), to an internal posture that is receptive to new information (Kim, 2012), or to informational sharing, self-disclosure, and commitment to uninhibited communication (Wanguri, 1996). Open-mindedness, for its part, may be seen to cover only some of those meanings and may also add others into the mix, such as eagerness for knowledge and experience and attunement to change and nuance (Guo-Ming & Starosta, 2008).

What the responses to the questionnaire suggest is that students do not closely distinguish between what constitutes openness and open-mindedness, and that there is some evidence of overlap, if not situational interchangeability, of the two terms. The following examples are instructive:

- responses such as 'an open mind to new experiences,' 'being open-minded about everything new,' and to 'be open to new experiences';
- responses such as 'an open mind to other cultures,' 'open to interculturality,' and to 'be open to cultural differences'; and
- responses such as 'being open-minded; say yes to everything,' 'embracing everything with an open mind,' and to 'be open to everything offered to you.'

It should be noted that such student responses show that with both openness and open-mindedness there is not only reference to a passive disposition or state of mind on the part of the student but also clear indication that their meaning involves an intentional or deliberate behavior.

5. Conclusion and implications

The study presented in this paper was originally conceived to take participants' interests and needs into account in identifying suitable contents and learning objectives for intercultural education modules for Erasmus students. The purpose of collecting students' own opinions without directing them with closed or domain-specific questions (e.g. about language, academic,

or social experiences abroad) informed the multi-dimensional nature of our study. Thanks to this approach, this study could arrive in a more open way at a set of key criteria for a successful stay abroad as perceived by a large body of students in a European context.

This study shows that although language proficiency is the single most frequently mentioned aspect, students attached particular importance to aspects of personal development (in particular with respect to openness) and social contacts (crucially including friendship) in their responses. First, as far as language proficiency is concerned, this is a notable result given that the respondents represent a wide variety of majors from human sciences as well as natural sciences, engineering, and biomedical sciences. Given that the format of the question did not lead respondents to reflect on any specific dimension of their living abroad, it is particularly significant to observe that more than half of all responses refer to aspects of social contact and personal development, which is in line with what prior investigations of mobile students' needs, opinions, and expectations have highlighted.

Concerning the priority attributed to social contacts, Coleman (2013, 2015) and de Federico de la Rúa (2008) remark that friendships play a main role in mobile students' lives when abroad. Moreover, these relationships assume specific meanings and functions, depending on whether they are established with local, international, or co-national contacts. While the present study leaves open what kind of social networks respondents valued as important, it can be argued that local people, compatriots, and people from other countries are all included in students' general claim for friendship. After all, bonds with co-nationals are particularly significant for coping with the initial stress of living abroad (Coleman, 2013, 2015), and being part of an Erasmus community has importance because it allows language and cultural learning to take place within a less threatening and less demoralizing context of people who share similar necessities and challenges (Federico de la Rúa, 2008). Finally, in the eyes of many mobile students, having personal ties with locals is the best (if not the only) opportunity to integrate in the host environment both linguistically and culturally (e.g. Adams, 2006). In this respect, the investigation of whether and how students change their appraisal of different kind of relationships at different stages of their study abroad constitutes an interesting starting point for future studies. Furthermore, such a research track would be meaningful for students themselves, given McMillan and Opem's (2004) earlier cited finding that the majority of students remained friends with people they met during their stay abroad after they returned.

Still with regard to friendship, there is the wider question whether intercultural education could pay greater attention to the formation of friendships as a specific theme for intercultural learning, including friendships with co-nationals (inner circle), other international students (central circle), and locals (outer circle) (Coleman, 2013). In Holliday, Hyde and Kullman (2010) and Zhu (2014) one finds only passing references to friendship, with it never coming under question as a dimension for exploring successful intercultural interaction. If friendship merits mention at all, the trend seems to make it but one component within broader surveys of the structure of social interaction (Lustig and Koester, 2010; Martin and Nakayama, 2010). Jackson (2014) is a rare example of an introductory text on intercultural communication that includes an entire chapter on intercultural interpersonal relationships with an extensive discussion of intercultural friendships (and romance). The findings of this study may point to an opportunity to make friendship the point of departure or even the focal point for exploring the contours of intercultural communication during study stays abroad (Shaules, 2007). Such a focus would also yield low-threshold opportunities for the explication and exploitation of crucial aspects of intercultural interaction such as second identity construction and narrative exchange and interpretation (Benson et al., 2013).

Furthermore, this study confirms the importance that students attach to aspects of personal development, such as confidence and independence in student mobility experiences (Alfranseder, 2011, Coleman, 2003, Jackson, 2008; Meier & Daniels, 2013). It particularly highlights the prominence of openness/open-mindedness in student responses when they are asked to name the keys to a successful stay abroad. Since we have collected data from pre-departure, while-abroad, and upon-return students, we can likewise assume that in addition to the initial openness of a student for going abroad, students are referring to an openness that is honed through the experience of studying abroad. This is in agreement with the general view that openness is a characteristic that can be developed (Fantini, 2012), albeit perhaps only in the medium to long term (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). A natural issue that would then arise is whether this further form of openness would only be the result of so-called 'genuine mobility', or whether it may also be acquired through intercultural encounters 'at home'.

The fact that so many students name aspects of personal development as a success criterion for study abroad has implications for universities in how to prepare students for mobility. Given that 'openness' is mentioned roughly 100 times more by students as a criterion for success than 'culture-specific knowledge', it stands to reason that home and host universities could offer crucial support to students through efforts to strengthen such personal attitudes, traits, and behaviors. For instance, the IEREST project was constructively informed by these results in so far as it does not prepare students to adapt to a specific cultural environment; instead, it leads them to be autonomous in exploring diversities and ready to re-consider their points of views accordingly (IEREST, 2015). Likewise, the finding that openness in particular constitutes a key factor for students' positive appraisal of their mobility experience can be useful for additional pedagogical initiatives aimed at training mobile students from an intercultural point of view. This is especially important because, as Jackson has shown, too frequently there is no preparation offered by colleges and universities for students going abroad, or else it is only provided as a "brief orientation that focuses on logistics" (Jackson, 2012: 457).

In sum, taking into account students' voices concerning mobility is essential to help them make the most of their international experience at many levels. This exploratory study provides some clear indications of the aspects students focus on in this respect. It also demonstrates the need for further multi-dimensional research, for instance in the form of eliciting longer samples of discourse from students so as to obtain a more fully grounded emic understanding of the notions they put forward, or by tracking the evolution of student perspectives on success criteria throughout their mobility experience.

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Appendix 1

Overview of the codes and their frequency.

Code	Student responses included	Student responses excluded	Frequency ²
Academic success	Reference to academic success, academic goals, academic focus, earning good grades, studying/working hard at school, doing well in courses, exams, doing well at exams, completing project with success, attending courses, making the most of academic opportunities, success at thesis or in projects, academic ambition, successful completion of studies.		5% (104)
Commitment	Reference to commitment, drive, dedication, responsibility, perseverance, determination, resilience, motivation, engagement, involvement, discipline, persistence, effort, diligence, willpower, willingness, desire or will to succeed, initiative, energy, coping, pushing oneself.		4% (91)
Confidence	Reference to confidence, independence, courage, lack of fear, overcoming fears, self-belief, patience, comfort with the unknown, 'can-do' attitude, positive attitude, self-reliance, magnanimity, audacity, feeling strong, feeling unafraid, daring, facing challenges, taking things as they come, self-sufficiency, going with the flow, braveness, letting oneself go, not being ashamed or shy, willingness to try new things, not giving in to homesickness.		6% (137)
Contact with home	Reference to contact with or visits from relatives/friends at home.		<1% (12)
Culture-specific knowledge	Reference to a (good) knowledge of the culture.		<1% (3)
Curiosity and discovery	Reference to curiosity, discovery, spirit of adventure, interest/enthusiasm in new experiences/in the culture; learning/trying new things, learning (about)/ meeting/ discovering/ getting to know/ enjoying the culture, (having) new experiences, passion for adventure, cultural experiences,	e.g. explore, enthusiasm without mention of object; learn new things.	6% (128)

² Frequency of occurrence expressed as a percentage of the coded responses, followed by the number of instances in the coded sample.

	gaining enriched cultural knowledge, exploration, intercultural encounters, interaction with different cultures, intercultural interests.		
Extracurricular offer of activities	Reference to social/cultural/ extracurricular/leisure activities or events; events for exchange/international students .	e.g. activities, entertainment.	1% (21)
Get to know people	Reference to socializing, getting together with people, getting to know people, social contact, meeting (new/lots of) people, social connection, networking, companionship, new contacts, good social life, socializing with many or different people, good social environment, social life/interaction, contact with locals/students/international students.	e.g. social skills, social activities, attend as many events as possible, be sociable.	11% (251)
Making friends	Reference to making/finding/having friends, establishing friendship.	e.g. support from friends, friendly people, nice people.	11% (248)
Housing	Reference to accommodation, housing, student room, good/ safe/ comfortable/ clean/ well-stocked/ well-planned/ affordable place to stay.	e.g. live in the right part of the city, live close to the city centre.	5% (125)
Integration	Reference to integration, cultural integration, settlement, adaptability, assimilation, flexibility, changing one's own behavior in function of the environment, feeling comfortable/settled in one's host environment, achieving a sense of belonging.		2% (53)
Interesting courses	Reference to interesting, engaging, or appropriate courses/classes/lectures, good/ meaningful/right courses, interesting topics/ professors, good education, academically, broad offering of courses, experiencing a different kind of academic environment.	e.g. universities/schools with a good reputation, helpful professors.	5% (117)
Language proficiency	Reference to language knowledge/proficiency/skills, language use, language learning, language development, language courses.		11% (263)
Money and material goods	Reference to money, financial support, finances, bursaries, grants, stipends, cash, computers, funds, student loans.		7% (162)
Openness	Reference to openness, open-mindedness, being open to a new culture/situation/other people, understanding, tolerance, acceptance,		10% (229)

	withholding judgment, broadening horizons, broadmindedness, having an open mindset, having few or no expectations, trying everything, saying yes, embracing everything, avoidance of judgmentality or prejudice, gaining intercultural experience.		
Preparation	Reference to preparation, preparing oneself, information gathering, doing research in advance, getting ready by undertaking certain actions.	e.g. information.	3% (63)
Respect	Reference to respect, love for or valuing of other cultures, being nice to others, politeness, respect for cultural diversity, respect for difference, acceptance of cultural difference.		<1% (11)
Successful Communication	Reference to good communication, ease of communication, communicating (well), communication skills.		1% (16)
Travel	Reference to travel, travelling, visiting the country, seeing as much as possible of the country.		4% (100)
University support	Reference to university support, institution support, administration support, good administration.	e.g. organization, guidance, information, (proper) support, administration, helpful professors.	7% (159)